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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000290

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN EFFORTS TO FOLLOW AQIM HOSTAGE CRISIS IN MALI

REF: BAMAKO 00256

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Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: On March 18 the Ambassador met with the two Austrian diplomats - Anton Prohaska, a former Austrian Ambassador to France, and Alexander Erlich-Adam, a more junior Austrian MFA Privileges and Immunities official fluent in French - dispatched to Bamako to work toward the release of two Austrian nationals being held by AQIM in northern Mali. Mali does not appear to be the focus of hostage release efforts - presuming such efforts are even ongoing. Prohaska said Austria was reaching out to friendly Muslim nations to drum up international pressure for the hostages' release. While the Austrian government has ruled out negotiations with AQIM, Prohaska said other "well-intentioned" actors, including the right-wing Austrian politician Joerg Haidar and Libyan leader Mouammar Qadhafi, are seeking to interject themselves into the negotiation process. End Summary.

Austria Spinning its Wheels in Bamako

2.(C) Prohaska and Erlich-Adam are leading a four person team dispatched from Austria to Mali after AQIM apparently moved two abducted Austrian nationals from north Africa to northern Mali. An official from the Austrian Interior Ministry and a member of the Austrian intel services are currently working out of the French Embassy in Bamako. Austria, which does not have an Embassy in Mali, decided to set up within the French rather than the German Embassy in part to distance itself from the 2003 hostage negotiations between Germany and what was then the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). France is also standing in for Slovenia, the current holder of the EU presidency, which does not have a mission in Mali. Austria did not, said Prohaska, want to mix up the current hostage case with that of the German tourists in 2003 who were eventually ransomed for several million Euros.

3.(C) Mali does not appear to be the center of gravity for hostage release efforts. Prohaska said he was perplexed by Austrian news reports describing a whirlwind of activity by Austrian officials on the ground in Mali. The reality is

much more sobering as Prohaska, Erlich-Adam and their two colleagues attempt to navigate through the Malian bureaucracy while undergoing a crash-course on the complex political and security dynamics of northern Mali.

4.(C) Prohaska said he had met with Mali's Director General for State Security Col. Mamy Coulibaly and also with President Amadou Toumani Toure. He described Col. Coulibaly as long on promises but short on information. Col. Coulibaly told the Austrians during their last meeting that he didn't know whether the hostages were in Mali. Prohaska and Erlich-Adam are scheduled to meet with Col. Coulibaly again on March 18.

5.(C) When asked about any on going release efforts, Prohaska said he believed there was contact between Austria and AQIM but that he was not privy to the details. He reiterated Austria's refusal to negotiate with AQIM or meet a ransom demand. Prohaska indicated that Austria was already planning the logistics of evacuating the two hostages, presuming AQIM were to release them in northern Mali, by examining which airfields in the north were serviceable for which type of aircraft. He said Austria was hoping to capitalize on its good relations with the Muslim world to increase pressure on AQIM to release the hostages. He noted that other unofficial actors, including Joerg Haider and Qadhafi, were attempting to insert themselves into the picture by assuming the role of negotiator.

Frustration with Algiers

6.(C) Prohaska expressed concern that unrest related to the bandit Ibrahim Bahanga in the area of Tinzwaten north-east of Kidal, or the distribution of foodstuffs in Kidal planned

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by the International Committee for the Red Cross for later this week, could set the hostages' captors on edge or otherwise interfere with release efforts. He also expressed frustration with Algeria. He said the team of Austrian officials sent to Algiers were in a "very difficult position" and described the Algerians as "extremely tough and security minded." "They are shaking their heads in Vienna," said Prohaska, "because our people in Algiers can't do anything."

Comment: Qadhafi Again?

7.(C) If an effort to secure the release of the two Austrian hostages is underway, it is clearly not being directed from Mali. Although we tried to ease the Austrians' concerns about collateral damage from Bahanga's exploits in Tinzwaten - which we regard as unrelated and for the moment far removed from the Austrian hostage crisis - Prohaska and Erlich-Adam are in the unenviable position of having parachuted into extremely unfamiliar terrain for Austrian diplomats. It is therefore perhaps not surprising to see their attentions diverted by an opposition newspaper's chronic rumblings of an impending Tuareg revolt, concerns about the ICRC's humanitarian efforts in northern Mali, and Col. Mamy Coulibaly's empty promises. Qadhafi is fresh from having just brokered an end to two other hostages crises in Mali and Niger (Ref A). Although negotiating with AQIM is completely different from dealing with small-time Tuareg bandits like Ibrahim Bahanga, it would be consistent with Libyan actions in Mali for Qadhafi to attempt tackle another hostage situation, and thereby reinforce his self-appointed status as leader of the Sahara.

8.(U) Tripoli minimized considered.
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